

## **February Heart Month Week 2: Sudden Cardiac Arrest**

*Information adapted from the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute  
<http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/health/health-topics/topics/scda/>*

### **Overview**

The rate and rhythm of the heart is controlled by an electrical system. Problems with this electrical system can cause disturbed rhythms of the heart called arrhythmias. There are many types of arrhythmias. During an arrhythmia, the heart can beat too fast, too slow, or irregularly. Some arrhythmias can cause the heart to stop pumping blood to the body — these arrhythmias cause sudden cardiac arrest (SCA).

SCA is not the same as a heart attack. A heart attack occurs if blood flow to part of the heart muscle is blocked. During a heart attack, the heart usually doesn't suddenly stop beating. SCA, however, may happen after or during recovery from a heart attack.

People who have heart disease are at higher risk for SCA. However, SCA can happen in people who appear healthy and have no known heart disease or other risk factors for SCA.

Most people who have SCA die from it — often within minutes. Rapid treatment of SCA with a defibrillator can be lifesaving. A defibrillator is a device that sends an electric shock to the heart to try to restore its normal rhythm. Automated external defibrillators (AEDs) can be used by bystanders to save the lives of people who are having SCA. These portable devices often are found in public places, such as shopping malls, golf courses, businesses, airports, airplanes, casinos, convention centers, hotels, sports venues, and schools.

### **Risk Factors**

The risk of sudden cardiac arrest (SCA) increases with age. The risk also is higher if you have underlying heart disease. Men are two to three times more likely to have SCA than women.

SCA rarely occurs in children unless they have inherited problems that make them likely to have SCA. Only a very small number of children have SCA each year.

### **Major Risk Factors**

The major risk factor for SCA is coronary heart disease (CHD). Most people who have SCA have some degree of CHD, but it is often “silent” — meaning the individual has no signs or symptoms.

People who have SCA may have had silent, or undiagnosed, heart attacks in the past but do not know that they have had one. The chances of having SCA are higher during the first 6 months after a heart attack.

**Other risk factors for SCA include:**

- A personal or family history of SCA or inherited disorders that make you prone to arrhythmias
- A personal history of arrhythmias
- Heart attack
- Heart failure
- Drug or alcohol abuse

**Signs and Symptoms of SCA**

Most commonly, a person with SCA suddenly collapses. When someone else attempts to feel for a pulse, no heartbeat can be found.

Some people may have a racing heartbeat or feel dizzy or lightheaded just before they faint. Within an hour before SCA, some people have chest pain, shortness of breath, nausea (feeling sick to the stomach), or vomiting.

**Lowering the risk of SCA**

Following a healthy lifestyle can help you lower your risk for CHD, SCA, and other heart problems. For tips, check out the Life's Simple 7 article in Week 1.